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AUTHOR Rudo, Zena H.
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ABSTRACT

This paper constructs a multi-systemic picture of the impact of family violence on children, families, and society through a review of the empirical literature in these areas and their inter-relationships. Findings from the review include: (1) the experience of physical abuse has been associated with aggression toward others, children who have been sexually abused have been shown to exhibit more maladaptive sexual behavior, and children who have been psychologically abused experience low self-esteem; (2) infants and young children who have been physically abused have been found to play less when compared with nonabused infants and show less positive affect; (3) 82 percent of men who had witnessed parental spouse abuse in one study were also victims of child abuse; (5) children who have been physically abused have been found to display poor school adjustment and academic performance; (6) children who have been physically neglected have been reported to manifest more behavior problems and have greater school difficulties; and (8) students with delinquency referral have been found to have higher rates of abuse. (Contains 37 references.) (CR)

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Shortcuts

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Introduction

Childhood victimization and the witnessing of violence in the family have substantiated short- and long-term negative consequences for child and adult behaviors. The deleterious physical and emotional impact on children and families of violence in the home, community, and school is a serious problem. Correlations between family violence, child abuse and neglect, school behavior problems, juvenile delinquency, and criminal activity have been documented. However, there is limited empirical knowledge in each of the areas and even less when inter-relationships among the areas are explored. The purpose of this paper is to construct a multi-systemic picture of the impact of family violence on children, families, and society through the empirical literature in these areas and their inter-relationships.

A review of the literature is important as a framework upon which to construct future research, practice, and policy. A search of the psychological, sociological, educational, medical, and dissertation indexes of literature over the past 15 years provided a broad representation of the empirical research on family violence. Additional research is needed, especially prospective studies that consider questions regarding methodological issues.

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Violence in the Family

The "cycle of violence," "violence begets violence," and "intergenerational transmission of violence" are phrases that are often used interchangeably in the literature to refer to children who were abused becoming abusers or violent offenders, and more recently, witnesses of family violence becoming victims or violent offenders. Although most survivors of childhood maltreatment do not have a criminal record, a longitudinal study of abuse demonstrated that those who were abused or neglected as children were 58% more likely to be arrested as juveniles, 38% more likely to be arrested as adults, and 38% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime (Widom, 1989).

The term family violence has often been used to focus specifically on marital violence. Researchers and practitioners have broadened the field's scope and the public's awareness by identifying family violence as all violence that occurs in the family. Family violence includes child abuse and neglect, spouse abuse, sibling abuse, courtship abuse, elder abuse, and violence witnessed in the home. The following sections describe the relationship of many of the manifestations of family violence to a variety of behavioral, emotional, and functional problems.

Child Abuse and Neglect

The experience of physical abuse has been associated with aggression toward others. Children who have been sexually abused have been shown to exhibit more maladaptive sexual behavior, and children who have been psychologically abused experience low self-esteem (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Claussen & Crittenden, 1991; Copeland, 1988). Infants and young children who have been physically abused have been found to play less than comparison nonabused infants, be less focused, show less positive affect (Howard, 1986; Wasserman, Gardier, Allen, & Shilansky, 1987), and show patterns of anxious or disorganized attachment (Cicchetti, 1987; Field, 1987). Sexual incest has been linked to depression, nightmares, bed wetting, clinging, and anxiety (Oates, 1987), and neglect has been connected with emotional withdrawal and intellectual delay (Kent, 1976).

Marital/Parental Violence and Child Maltreatment

Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1981) found that 82% of the men in their study who had witnessed parental spouse abuse were also victims of child abuse. Lewis (1987) indicated that women who were physically abused by their partner in adulthood were five times more likely than a comparison group of nonabused women to report experiences of child abuse.

It has been observed that children of battered women are at an increased risk for being abused, with estimates of an overlap between spousal abuse and child abuse ranging from 30% to 60% (Hughes, 1988; O'Keefe, 1995; Suh &

from 30% to 60% (Hughes, 1988; O'Keefe, 1995; Suh & Abel, 1990). Children who were witnesses to marital violence in addition to being victims of abuse have been discovered to have the greatest behavior problems when compared to children who only witnessed violence or those with neither experience (Hughes, 1988; Kalmuss, 1984). Some of their behavior problems include conduct problems (Hershorn & Rosenbaum, 1985), adjustment difficulties (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986), and aggression (O'Keefe, 1995). Increases in sleep disorders, abdominal distress, headaches and backaches, and obesity were found to be physical consequences of family violence (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Moeller, Bachmann, & Moeller, 1993; Rimza, & Niggermann, 1982). Children exposed to family violence have also been found to exhibit fewer interests and social activities and lower school performance (Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, & Jaffe, 1986).

Family Violence and School Behavior Problems

Violence in schools has become an increasing problem, and solutions have not been readily visible. Problems have included but are not limited to truancy, assault and battery (on other children and staff), substance use, bullying, sexual offenses, homicide and suicide, gang violence, and racially motivated violence. Many familial and environmental factors have been studied to explain or predict these school behavior problems.

Children who have been physically abused have been found to display poor school adjustment and academic performance (Garbarino, 1987; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993). Children who have been physically neglected have been reported to manifest more behavior problems and have greater school and academic difficulties than control groups (Garbarino, 1987; Reidy, 1977). Children who have been subjected to maltreatment demonstrate a higher risk of failure in school, and older children (age 14 and up) who are experiencing external problems (e.g., pregnancy, institutionalization, etc.) often end up dropping out (Kurtz et al., 1993). Trupin, Tarico, Low, Jemelka, and McClellan (1993) suggested that the cognitive and emotional sequelae of abuse contribute to severe emotional disturbances.

Zingraff, Leiter, Johnsen, and Myers (1994) found that adequate school performance was associated with a substantial reduction in the risk of delinquency among maltreated children, particularly those who suffered from parental neglect. This is one of the few studies that has looked at the relationship between child maltreatment, juvenile delinquency, and school behavior.

Violence in the Family and Juvenile Delinquency

Patterson (1982) hypothesized that the reciprocal interactive processes of child, parent, and external stress were significant in producing aggression, child abuse, and

significant in producing aggression, child abuse, and delinquency. Empirical evidence from the self-reports of adolescents who are delinquents concerning prior abuse histories have resulted in rates from 21% (Alfaro, 1981) to 51% (Mouzakitis, 1981). Adolescents who had committed sexual offenses were often found to have experienced physical and sexual abuse as well as neglect (Widom & Ames, 1994). Tarter, Hegedus, Winsten, and Alterman (1984) found that 44% of the children in their study who had been abused committed violent crimes of an assaultive nature, compared with 16% of the nonabused children who were delinquents.

Scudder, Blount, Heide, and Silverman (1993) reported that students with delinquency referrals had higher rates of abuse (21.4%) than students who had no delinquency referrals (6.1%). Empirical evidence has also associated childhood abuse with teenage runaways, with percentages ranging as high as 78% (Farber, Kinast, McCoard, & Falkner, 1984). Dembo, Williams, Wothke, Schmeidler, and Brown (1992) documented that family problems and abuse/victimization experiences influence youths' initial involvement in drug use and delinquent behavior, and that once these behavior patterns were established, they tended to continue over time.

Family Violence and Adult Criminal Behavior

Dutton and Hart (1992) studied incarcerated men and found that 69% of those who had witnessed inter-parental abuse committed physical crimes and 25% of those who had witnessed inter-parental abuse committed sexual crimes. Among these incarcerated men, physical abuse in childhood was found to increase the chances for physical abuse in the family by a factor of five, and these men were twice as likely to abuse strangers or non-family members. Similarly, being a victim of child sexual abuse increased the probability of committing sexual abuse against strangers five times and within the family eight times (Dutton & Hart, 1992). Widom (1989) discovered that the adults who had been abused and neglected as children had a higher arrest rate for adult criminality and violent criminal behavior. Straus (1991) found a correlation between laws authorizing physical punishment in schools and the homicide rate.

Implications

Our society struggles to deal with problems of negative behaviors, crime, and substance abuse knowing that experiences in the early years often portend the occurrence of these behaviors in later life. Children who have experienced violence in the family have difficulty relating to others, school experiences, and standards and laws. These children exhibit inappropriate internalizing and externalizing behaviors that impede their physical and emotional development. The increase of violence in our communities has been directly associated with intra-familial factors. Research has shown the adverse impact of child maltreatment and domestic violence not only on the victims,

maltreatment and domestic violence not only on the victims, but on society as a whole. The cost to the public is great, financially and psychologically. Intervention and prevention must be linked to these findings.

Although the research strongly indicates that violence in the family, particularly child abuse and neglect, is predictive of future violent behavior, the majority of abused and/or neglected children do not become violent or victims. Are there protective factors that exist in a child's life that enable that child to be resilient? Research is needed to evaluate the potential mediating variables that act to shield children exposed to violence from later dysfunctional behaviors.

While there has been an abundance of individual studies on violence in the family, and its negative effects on children have been well established, findings have been limited by the diversity of subject characteristics, definitions of variables, and measurement methods used.

Integration of these studies has also been limited. The difficulty in empirically observing families unless they are willing participants (or a part of the official records of a public agency), seems related to issues of privacy, trust or potential for criminal prosecution.

It should be recognized that it is difficult to empirically observe families, to match samples in a controlled study, to find the funding for longitudinal research, and to overcome the issues of confidentiality that impact the availability of records. Long-term consequences of childhood maltreatment have been difficult to pinpoint, particularly considering the many other mediating factors which may affect children's lives. However, the family is primary in the nurturing of mentally healthy individuals and providing a basis of knowledge for the causes, dynamics, and ameliorating factors of family violence that may impact the resolution of many of the problems faced in our society.

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Authors

Zena H. Rudo, MSW, ACSW
Doctoral Program, Child and Family Studies
FMHI/Dept. of Special Education
University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Ave., HMS 301
Tampa, Florida 33620
Voice: 813/974-7204
Fax: 813/974-5542
rudo@typhoon.coedu.usf.edu

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